1-1994

# Reconstructive Criticism: Review of *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism* edited by Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope.

Meryl Altman
*DePauw University*, maltman@depauw.edu

nearly a year and donated some money to it, she believed that "the Woman Question definitely was subsumed within the Social Question." The new society for which she fought would resolve issues of poverty and equality for women by socializing property. Other socialist women found this position inadequate. And indeed, O'Hare sometimes seemed to agree with them—for example, struggling long and hard to increase the wages of working women by focusing public attention on the connection between women's low wages and prostitution.

MILLER ATTRIBUTES MUCH of O'Hare's unwillingness to pay attention to gender distinctions to her own ascent to leadership in the party—an odd conclusion in the light of Miller's own insistence that she always felt excluded from policy-making and influence. Still, O'Hare finally distanced herself from Party leaders only after they abandoned her when she was arrested for antiwar activities during World War One. When her former allies refused to contribute to her legal costs and denied her the publicity they routinely gave to arrested male leaders, O'Hare turned her attention to women's issues.

Escorted to prison not by Frank but by her friend and fellow-socialist Grace Brewer, she survived horrendous and debilitating conditions by making common cause with the tiny group of women incarcerated there, particularly with her political opposite Emma Goldman. Sharing food, trinkets, letters and even visits from her husband and children with prisoners who had less then she, she began to pay attention to the particular ways in which women suffered discrimination. She fought and won the right for women to use the library, to have showers rather than unclean baths, and to have food that was at least equivalent to what the men had. Confronting her own deeply-rooted racism, she shared food and traded information with jailed African-American women. While she was in jail and after her release (which perhaps fortuitously accompanied the disintegration of the Socialist Party), she protested the press' refusal to pay attention to women political prisoners and battled against convict labor.

One leaves this biography with mixed feelings. Here is a woman whom Sally Miller convincingly portrays as a leader in a party that virtually ignored women. But, perhaps because the point of view from which we observe is so relentlessly that of Kate Richards O'Hare, we are unable to see her in the roundedness that must have constituted her life. Frank O'Hare remains a shadow; the children have no voice; the opinions of socialist party leaders are invoked rather than quoted; the Justice Department, which pursued her for years, is barely heard; not even the newspapers that published her pieces, many of whom must have commented on her presence, make an impact on the reader.

Even the voice of Kate Richards O'Hare is circumscribed. Sally Miller tells us about political positions and domestic upheavals, about intellectual quarrels and personal loyalties, but gives us little of the language and substance that would enable us to make our own judgments. Perhaps Miller, constrained by requirements of space and the limitations of her sources, felt unable to provide some of the interpretive depth that would have enriched this volume. Its absence should not prevent us from welcoming a biography that restores one of America's great women to us.

# Reconstructive criticism

## *by Meryl Altman*

**Sexual Practice, Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism,** edited by Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993, 388 pp., $49.95 hardcover, $19.95 paper.
**New Lesbian Criticism: Literary and Cultural Readings,** edited by Sally Munt. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 207 pp., $40.00 hardcover, $15.00 paper.

A FRIEND OF MINE IN the Midwest was talking to a baby dyke she knows. They were thinking of going to a women's music festival (not the big one). It wasn't the kind of music either of them liked; it was too expensive; it was at a bad time. But: "Will I see other lesbians there?" asked the younger woman. I have a feeling she went. Where one's culture is thin on the ground, other considerations (especially aesthetic ones) fall away.

I tell this story to remind myself that the world both has and hasn't changed for lesbians since I was her age, as I set out to review two agreeably meaty, but very different, collections of lesbian literary criticism. Reina Lewis, writing in *New Lesbian Criticism*, sees one of the main challenges facing lesbian cultural critics as "how [to] negotiate the effects of scarcity regarding the rarity of material and the inflated expectations of readers." This politics of scarcity, which Bonnie Zimmerman (another contributor) and editor Sally Munt also see as crucial in understanding the history of lesbian writing and reading, will undoubtedly affect the reception of these two books as well. Anyone at all interested in this field (where many write but few are published) will read both books; and so they should.

Though published at the same moment, these two books seem to come from different eras. *New Lesbian Criticism*, while it maintains a commitment to feminist politics and to intelligibility, is clearly informed by recentish developments in post-structuralism and cultural studies (all contributors but one are Brits), right down to its imitation-Routledge silver and black cover. Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope, on the other hand, open *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory* with a frontal attack on post-structuralism and post-modernism, which they find irrecoverably hostile to the political interests of lesbians and of women generally. Most of their selections employ traditional, "commonsense" strategies such as close reading and autobiographical response. Wolfe and Penelope say that theirs is a "separatist" book (though not all contributors identify as separatists); Sally Munt affirms her commitment to lesbian studies as an autonomous movement, though one which intersects with women's studies, gay (male) studies and what she calls "cultural criticism." Wolfe and Penelope would agree about the autonomy but not, it seems, about the intersections.

Scarcity ups the ante—each book that does appear is expected to be everything to all people—and this undoubtedly influences my disappointment with the highly selective survey of the field offered by Wolfe and Penelope. But consider the hypothetical undergraduate reader, isolated from potential community and sage advice, who delightedly purchases only this one book and believes she will discover from it what lesbian criticism means in 1993.

She will learn a lot from it, but she will not learn: (1) that interdisciplinary work, especially on the border between literary study and history, has been crucial; (2) that whatever we may think of it, gay studies exists as a developing field; (3) that the most vigorous lesbian cultural genres at the moment, whatever we may think of them, include detective fiction, romances, porn and street theatre; (4) that something called the "sex wars" happened, with bitter debates over the nature and function of sexual representations and resulting fallout for both feminist criticism and lesbian politics; (5) that "culture" can be expressed in genres other than fiction (film, music, etc.); (6) that "mainstream feminist criticism" has modified its policy of "silencing" lesbian authors and themes since about 1980; (7) that going to one's own autobiography is not the only way to understad how readings are socially shaped. Moreover, she will barely hear that lesbians of color and working-class lesbians have revolutionized both lesbian and feminist studies with the demand for more than token inclusion.

If instead this hypothetical neophyte reads only Sally Munt's book, she might come away with more of a feeling of the "cutting edge," of lesbian critics and creative writers in dialogue with one another, and with a set of references to other recent work to follow up on. On the other hand, she might come away lacking an appreciation for the origins of lesbian feminism and how far it has come. *New Lesbian Criticism* is considerably less ambitious historically (its ten essays were commissioned especially for its publication). Wolfe and Penelope reprint as their lead essay Bonnie Zimmerman's golden oldie, "What Has Never Been," which surveys developments until approximately 1981; Munt leads off with a new essay by Zimmerman which updates the survey and revises some of her earlier conclusions. Obviously the neophyte needs to read both (and so do the rest of us).

BUT IF *SEXUAL PRACTICE, Textual Theory* was intended as a "greatest hits" collection, key articles and important debates and players are missing. Where are Catharine Stimpson, Karla Jay, Bertha Harris, Joan Nestle, Marilyn Frye, Jane Rule—not to mention Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde? And while many of the articles Wolfe and Penelope do include appear to be older, their provenance and original dates are not clearly indicated. The pedant in me is bothered by the thought that new readers will take the older essays here as the last word on their subject and dutifully cite them as 1993, thus obscuring the history of scholarship. This may seem prissy to some, but either scholarship matters or it doesn't. And if it doesn't (which is a perfectly honorable political position), why write and edit collections of it?

Beyond quibbles, though, these omissions reinforce my sense that rather than offering a balanced and inclusive historical view, the editors were more concerned to hold some sort of Maginot Line against deconstructive theory and other impurities. They lay out this line fully, though not always clearly, in a proliferation of editorial front matter. Not only the polemic preface, but four rather repetitious managerial introductions to subsections of the book, argue for what they call the "ontological status" of lesbians (meaning, I think, that lesbian subjectivity exists transhistorically, and we can say what it is); assert that the definition of "lesbian" must be sexual in nature; insist that the key fact of lesbian history is *silencing*; and strenously resist the suggestion that matters are more complex than this.

Their manner is by no means coy. "In one hundred years," Wolfe and Penelope say on page one, "German sexologists have 'appeared' lesbians in order to pathologize us and French postmodernists have 'disappeared' us in order to deconstruct sex and gender categories and to 'interrogate' 'the' 'subject.'" Now, the concern about post-structuralism's tendency to undermine agency and thus downplay both oppression and resistance is not a vacuous one. Several of Munt's contributors, notably Reina Lewis, take it seriously. But Wolfe and Penelope aren't discussing post-structuralism, they're caricaturing it.

It's easy enough to attack Foucault for being a man (he was) and fair enough to accuse him of ignoring women (he did, for the most part). But it is a willful misreading to claim that because he would not read the history of sexuality as a story of repression and silencing he was unaware of the existence of oppression. In their insistence on a unified, intelligible self, Wolfe and Penelope fall back on such authorities as Erik Erikson (no feminist, the last time I looked) and on such imprecise and class-bound terms as "self-actualization."

Besides, not all denials of the universal speaking subject come from France: American lesbian theorists have been eloquent on the topic, and so have women of color. Trying to purge feminism of Foucault-like ideas at this point is a bit like being on a no-salt diet. It's easy enough to avoid adding salt to a dish, but what about the salt that's already in just about everything edible we buy? And it distorts the history of feminism, I think, to claim women have adopted these ideas only because we've somehow been hoodwinked by male theorists.

Ironically, many of the most interesting essays in Wolfe and Penelope's collection undermine the idea that we can determine in any preemptive way what a lesbian text is or what a lesbian reading can be. Paula Bennett's delightful discussion of how in her youth she read Shakespeare's *Henry V* (!) as a lesbian text, because she needed to, moves from attention to ambiguities within texts to a claim about the creative reconstructionism of readings. Bonnie Zimmerman's second essay, "Perverse Readings: The Lesbian Appropriation of Literature," provides a parallel meditation on the complexities of "reading as" and "reading against the grain."

Judith Fetterley, who invented the term "resisting reader," does a similar job on Sarah Orne Jewett's *Deephaven*. Though this appears to be an older essay, it is still lucid and helpful, providing a context for an underappreciated work within the development of self-conscious lesbianism around the turn of the century. And Elaine Marks' "Lesbian Intertextuality" (another golden oldie) sensitively traces the evolution of a particular tradition of imaging lesbian sexuality, the "Sappho model," through a number of texts and lives (mainly French ones), in a way that demonstrates the power of fiction to construct a particular lesbian sexuality in a particular time and place. All these readings, to my mind, support the view that the subjectivity of readers and authors—lesbian or otherwise—needs to be called into question, especially through historical analysis, if only to keep pace with the observable complexities of human experience.

Many other essays in *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory* will be helpful to new readers. Linnea Stenson provides a straightforward and sensible history of the thematic movement from "isolation" through "community" to "diversity" in twentieth- century lesbian realistic fiction, and also stands out for noticing the genuine centrality of the writing of women of color to these developments: from hints and images in such Harlem Renaissance figures as Nella Larsen, Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar-Nelson to the forthright novels of Ann Allen Shockley and Audre Lorde.

Perhaps my favorite essay is Sarah Dreher's moving first-person account of the difficulties, emotional and practical, of living and writing as a lesbian "before Stonewall," and of the mutually enriching and empowering relation between lesbian writer and lesbian community that became possible afterwards. Carolyn Allen's discussion of incest themes in lesser-known works of Djuna

Barnes still seems as finely tuned and illuminating as when I first read it, though recent biographical revelations about Barnes, which have changed and deepened our understanding of this issue in her work, make me wish it could have been updated.

Closer to the spirit of the introduction, however, is Anne Charles' "Two Feminist Criticisms: A Necessary Conflict?" Charles provides a perfectly justified and cogent critique of Shari Benstock's misguided discussion of lesbian sexuality in *Women of the Left Bank* (1986), displaying and analyzing the book's more homophobic moments and pointing out that many mainstream reviews ignored or glossed over the point. She concludes, however, that writing about lesbians is something only lesbians are really equipped to do, and comes close to urging straight women to butt out. (Interestingly, Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, writing in Munt's anthology, also identify Benstock's "uneasiness" with the same material; however, they attribute this not to her sexual preference but to "a moral judgment coming from the cultural feminism of the 1970s...not really borne out by all the author's material." This may be overcharitable, but it is also more nuanced and historical.)

I share Anne Charles' irritation about the blind spots in *Women of the Left Bank*, and I agree it is crucial to identify and name lesbophobia wherever it may be found, even within feminism. But I had the same curious feeling while reading her essay as when reading much of the editors' introductory matter about what a lesbian is and isn't. They attack not only Foucault but, closer to home, lesbian philosopher Ann Ferguson (for defining "lesbian" as someone who has chosen to identify herself as such). I began to feel that I was at a meeting—the kind of meeting I don't go to much any more—and that things were heating up, and that in another minute the organizers were going to ask some of the women there to leave, because according to their definition these women didn't really deserve to call themselves members of the group. The nicest thing I can think of to say about this style of politics is that it has had its day.

THE FINAL SECTION of *Sexual Practice, Textual Theory* is called "(Op)positional Aesthetics: Creating Lesbian Cultures." It includes an annotated, selected (and highly selective) bibliography, and four essays that attempt to name what is, or should be, essential about lesbian writing, in a way that begins as descriptive analysis and ends in utopianism. Reading this section, I discovered that I find the whole project of search for an aesthetic—which Munt also mentions that she finds desirable—puzzling and somewhat worrisome.

What is an aesthetic, and why would a colonized people want one? When powerful groups in the past created aesthetic criteria, their intent was to include certain "key" texts, exclude others, form a canon, and then disguise what were basically political judgments as neutral considerations of style. (It then becomes the job of professional critics like me to police the boundaries of the aesthetic and rule on who is, or is not, a citizen of the republic of letters. Those outside don't get to vote.) So do lesbians need one too, in order to argue that works written by us or dealing with our experience are equally deserving?

There's a trap here. Lesbian criticism so far (like feminist criticism as a whole) has been caught between two competing aesthetics. One favors authenticity, realism, experience, verisimilitude—along with "positive images" of lesbians (never mind that these values may be contradictory); the other prefers textual disruption (or "subversion"), which it claims must lead, or at least relate, to revolution on a social level.

Each aesthetic can become an argument for excluding works that seem to belong more to the other side. Rita Felski has argued persuasively that the exaltation of textual disruptiveness within feminist aesthetics has misdirected attention away from politically crucial realist texts. But the argument could also be made in the other direction: Bertha Harris argued a long time ago that the "positive images" approach to lesbian literature and history encouraged us to ignore and misread such difficult and disturbing writers as Barnes and Stein. Neither aesthetic can begin to cover what is historically, let alone potentially, available. The whole notion of "aesthetics" implies judgment, which implies exclusions; this strikes me as either premature or (more likely) belated. Felski concludes that this whole language needs to be superseded—which is why her book is called *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics.*

Nothing in Wolfe and Penelope has persuaded me that she is wrong. The contributors' calls to aesthetics (mainly of the second variety) seem to substitute textual disruption for political activity in a rather unexamined way. "The startling repercussions of these textual worlds," says Jeffner Allen in "Poetic Politics: How the Amazons Took the Acropolis," "take by surprise, and devastate, patriarchal institutions that would control the distribution of meaning, value, and physical goods against the self-defined interests of each woman." I understand that texts can call patriarchy into question—but "devastate"? Should I stop worrying about Bosnia and just read Gertrude Stein? "Lesbian aesthetics not only emerges from but serves to create lesbian space." Where? Just by saying so?

Alice Parker takes a similar tack. "Feminist consciousness is a fiction I invent...in order to survive in a patriarchal world... I choose to be a lesbian in order to direct my political and sexual desire in a positive channel, as a medium channels spirits." Whatever works is good therapy, but what about those of us who don't believe in ghosts? This approach does more than Foucault ever did to fictionalize, generalize and thus "disappear" lesbian existence. I too appreciate Nicole Brossard's often quoted statement that a lesbian who doesn't reinvent the word/world is in the process of disappearing. But words and world are different things; and reinventing either will take more than announcing one is doing so. "Good morning, I think I'll reinvent the world today." Am I just getting old?

Parker's essay, which ends the collection, describes her own struggle to maintain her elaborated lesbian identity after the unexpected breakup of a long-term relationship through which that identity was conceptualized. It's worth paying attention to this, distressing reading though it is (some of it's in French, too), because we need to think more about how individual love stories and the struggles of political communities are intertwined in lesbian culture. But Parker's solutions are fragmentary and depressing—reaching other women around the world by asserting that one is doing so, channelling past selves (literally), adopting pop psychology languages of the most apolitical sort. (Can such concepts as codependency truly be applied uncritically to lesbian lives?) I don't wish to seem unsympathetic to the evident pain and despair expressed in this article, the more so because it's the only indication in the book that 1970s visions don't mesh with 1990s realities. As Parker asks, quoting Amy Tan, "How do we lose our innocence without our hope?"

*NEW LESBIAN CRITICISM* names this problem and suggests some optimistic and practical solutions. Discussing "continuities within lesbian theory" from the 1970s to the 1990s, Bonnie Zimmerman notes that

> Within that continuity, "lesbian" is positioned as a metaphor for the radical disruption of dominant systems and discourses. It is equally clear that most lesbians...do not perceive themselves and their lives in those terms. Frankly, I can do so only on my very best days. (p.13)

Part of her solution (the essay is open-ended) is to pay critical attention to differences among lesbian writers and readings, and understand them as differences in (personal and collective) history, which are better served by naming them precisely than by papering them over.

Perhaps as a legacy from British cultural studies, or perhaps as a legacy of socialist feminism's greater influence there, this attention to specific history—including that of the critic herself—marks every essay in the collection. Anna Wilson's brilliant discussion shows how Audre Lorde's *Zami* works differently within the respective canons of black studies and white women's studies and in the stories about tradition told by such heterosexual black feminist writers as Alice Walker. She goes on to underline the questionable political application of generational and familial metaphors to lesbian (and much feminist) writing. Katie King, also writing on *Zami*, explores the historical context of Lorde's focus on the lesbian bar of the 1950s, a problematic site for emerging black and lesbian political identities. She notes that *Zami* was published in the same year as the Barnard Conference on the politics of sexuality, at a time when our attention was focused on difficulties of sexual representation as well as on the identity politics of anti-racist work within feminism; and she compares Lorde's treatment of McCarthyism as a factor in the politicization of gay identity to that of historians John D'Emilio and Allan Berubé, though she does not suggest the latter is more true. *Zami* becomes not just a retrospective novelistic vision but an event in gay and lesbian politics. Hilary Hinds' detailed history of the success of Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* shows that the mainstream popularity of both book and BBC dramatization was not just a sign of Winterson's talent and integrity. The book's identification as a "high culture" or "quality" production was key, as was the widespread reaction against fundamentalism in Britain in the wake of the Rushdie affair.

Their specificity may mean that Munt's collection of essays will date. But they will date honestly; whereas Wolfe and Penelope's book, which floats between mythical Amazon time and the unspecified "now" of its writing, is dated already. Ironically, *New Lesbian Criticism* also strikes me as the less theoretically top-heavy, and more readable, of the two: its essays are more dedicated to getting on with the work of detailed reading (of both literary texts and cultural situations) than to defending any overall philosophical position.

Literary critics like to agonize over what good our work can ever do. One clear and unproblematic contribution lesbian critics can make is to give serious attention to the work of living lesbian writers. Essays in *New Lesbian Criticism* on Winterson, Sarah Schulman and Pat Califia advance this project. Munt, Lewis and Zimmerman suggest productive avenues for a future lesbian criticism which will balance attention to historical specificity with the need lesbian readers continue to feel for "real" authors, positive images and empowering lesbian heroines. If this book has an aesthetic, it involves irony, quizzical scepticism, honesty and basic research.

Contrasts between these two anthologies may suggest, overall, that the relationship between 1990s lesbian criticism and the tradition which gave rise to it is uneasy; still, it was cheering to get two whole books devoted to lesbian literary criticism to read. Wolfe and Penelope's claim that lesbians are still everywhere silent and invisible rang oddly in a summer where something called "lesbian chic" was all over the television. But while there may be fewer secrets and less silence, there are still a whole lot of lies around; less repression may involve equal, or even more, oppression. And while "bean-counting" has become unfashionable, lesbian work is still underrepresented in feminist collections, and work by women (but more especially work about women) seems to be somewhat underrepresented in "queer" criticism. Perhaps new lesbians and young women's studies students need to pass through all the historical stages their teachers did. We must not lose sight of the primary hunger for honest representations ("Will I see other lesbians there?") that drove lesbians into libraries in the first place. We're still here, we're not just queer, don't get too used to it.

**Cape Cod Postcard**

The map of the Cape flexes its muscles.
Manomet bulges—biceps to P-town's
curled fist. Inlets ripple like arterial
highways. I am here alone, in the off-season.

The hermit crabs and I have found
a hundred vacancies—unheated—and hope
to last the weekend without crying. The wind's
baritone is the only culture left here; it gropes

for the grass's high notes in the rain.
I've strained to hear the foghorn's boyish tenor
but it's gone, like the tourists' noisy children.
Will they remember it, as I have all these years—

the ocean's rooster—or was it just another
summer for them? Today I braved the beach
to watch cold fishermen in waders
casting off. What is it like to watch

the water not for metaphors, but fish?
I see the ocean's muddy hemline rising
like the tide of Paris fashions, or wish
I were a boat in the crook of Orleans'

arm. I hear of stranded pilot whales
at First Encounter Beach and think of love...
So, who said poets should be practical?
I hope this finds you well when it arrives.

**Off-Season**

The rain tells knock-knock jokes. Spiders batten
down the doors. Goldenrod keeps its lights on
all day, a funeral cortège as long
as a president's. One particular
cricket sings distinctly, close by. He is
Ishi, the pure voice of summer before tourists.
Butterflies flutter like the last load of laundry
hung out to dry. The beach looks littered
with summer people's broken furniture
but it is just the tide's huge ideograms.
Wind, which starched the neighbors' flag, now folds
the water into waves like a waiter
folding fancy napkins. The restaurant
will close though the waves continue,
eternity's assembly-line like the one
weekenders escaped from.
The neighbors have returned to Florida,
where they are winter people.
Gulls gossip, but only about locals.
Already the crickets have begun to sound like sleigh bells.

**—Jennifer Rose**